

Cultural Ambassadors: The Impact of Fulbright in India

By JANE E. SCHUKOSKE

For more than half a century, an American exchange program has helped thousands of students, teachers, academics and professionals to dream and to achieve goals for greater knowledge and understanding. In a quiet way, it has touched the lives of those who studied, taught or did research in the United States or India, and equipped them to share their experience with others.

Some 14,500 “cultural ambassadors” who benefited from the Fulbright program are today a large, collegial network promoting collaborations between the two countries.

Paul Amstutz, a Fulbright math teacher, said in a blog entry about his experience in India:

“Everyone involved, from the students and teachers to the gardening staff and daily rickshaw driver, to neighbors and shopkeepers we’ve befriended, and each member of my own family has been touched in so many positive ways.”

For many, the application for a grant is their first opportunity to try their hands at planning a proposal for a project abroad and imagining life there. It is an open, merit-based competition and emphasizes academic freedom. The United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) administers the exchanges between the two nations. Its selection committees of Indian and American experts often provide advice to unsuccessful candidates on ways to strengthen their proposals. Because the grants are competitive, many more people benefit from the process itself. All have had the chance to imagine themselves as cultural ambassadors abroad.

American scholars visiting India sometimes gain a deeper understanding of their own society and generate lasting impressions, friendships and professional growth. In recent years, U.S. scholars have taught forest economics in Mizoram, anthropology and counseling in Chhattisgarh, and communications in Haryana, learned about home-based neonatal care in Maharashtra and discussed human resource issues in the infor-

mation technology sector with students in Jammu and Kashmir.

- John Tharakan, professor of chemical engineering at Howard University in Washington, D.C., conducted research at New College in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, on using biological methods to make hazardous waste less environmentally harmful and organized a seminar on the subject.

- Fran Oneal, a lecturer in international relations from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, taught at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi during her grant period. She also spoke at a conference there on the influence of Indian Americans on U.S. foreign policy, politics and media, the changes that occurred in the United States following 9/11, and the intense American academic interest in India as an emerging power.

- Michael I. Kalinski from Kent State University in Ohio taught the physiology and biochemistry of exercise and sport at Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports in Patiala, Punjab.

Members of the participants’ families become cultural ambassadors, too.

- American biology professor Ragupathy Kannan lived with his wife and son at G.B. Pant University in Uttarakhand in 2007. While in Pantnagar, Kannan started a nature club and taught bird-watching classes to promote awareness of the biodiversity of the Terai and Kumaon Himalaya. His 10-year-old son, Amit, became an avid birder and helped as a resource person on field trips.

Indian scholars who went to the United States offered their perspectives on contemporary issues, apart from sharing their

Jane Schukoske (far right), USEFI’s executive director, interacts with International Leadership in Education Program Fellows at a pre-departure orientation in November 2007 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The fellows (from left) are Bobby P.R., Anitha K. Nair, USEFI staffers Sarina Paranjape, Amrita Ghosh and Rama Krishnamurthy, with U.S. Fulbright exchange teacher Sarah Shmitt.





Courtesy Ragupathy Kannan

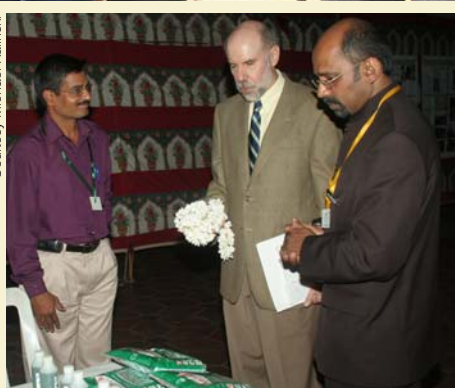
Left: Ragupathy Kannan points out a rare bird during a field lesson on bird identification at the Sanjay Van near Pantnagar in Uttarakhand. The students are part of the Pantnagar Nature Club established by Kannan at G.B. Pant University.

Far left: Michael I. Kalinski receives a trophy from G.L. Khanna, dean of the department of therapies and health sciences at the Faridabad Institute of Technology in Haryana in December 2007.

Below left: N. Shankar, a staffer at Tamil Nadu-based drug manufacturer Lactochem Limited, interacts with Frederick J. Kaplan (center), Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. Consul General in Chennai and Howard University professor John Tharakan at a 2007 symposium on Biological Methods of Waste Treatment and Management in Chennai.



Courtesy Michael Kalinski



Courtesy John Tharakan

country's rich culture.

- Rita Kothari of St. Xavier's College in Ahmedabad lectured on the media coverage of the 2002 Gujarat riots at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.
- Smita Mustansir Dalvi of MES Pillai's College of Architecture in Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra, spoke on Islamic art and architecture at the University of South Dakota's College of Fine Arts.
- M.V. Krishnayya, professor emeritus of philosophy at Andhra University in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, lectured on the shared values of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi in promoting a culture of nonviolence, at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
- Sarbani Mukherjee, a researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Change in Bangalore, Karnataka, presented a paper on the economics of groundwater management in South Asia at an International Food Policy Research Institute conference in Washington, D.C., in March 2007.
- Mehboob Singh, who works in the area of drug abuse for the Malwa Medical Relief Society in Bhatinda, Punjab, developed a poster titled "Risky Sexual Behaviors among Crack Cocaine Users in Baltimore," with Alamgir Golam Mahmood, a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow from Bangladesh, at a National Institute of

Drug Abuse conference in June 2007.

The exchanges have led to enduring collaborations. The alumni stay connected, advise applicants and current scholars, and often lead change within a field.

In 2006, University of Cincinnati engineering professor Daniel Oerther taught environmental biotechnology at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, and at Manipal University in Karnataka. He collaborated with Indian colleagues and secured funds from the U.S. National Science Foundation for research on water quality. In 2006, Abdul Jamil Urfi of the School of Environment Studies, University of Delhi, won the Kushlan Research Award in Ciconiiform Biology and Conservation for a collaborative grant with U.S. scientist Robert E. Bleiweiss of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on measuring the impact of pollution on pond herons in northern India.

Those in academia have developed courses in new areas. In 2006, Meenakshi Gopinath, principal of Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, and Manjrika Sewak, senior program officer with the New Delhi-based Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace, began a diploma program in conflict transformation at the college. Another alumna, Kaushikee, lecturer at the Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, teaches in the master's program in conflict analysis. The center opened in 2004 and hosted an American professor, Marie Isabelle Chevrier, that year.

For more information:

United States Educational Foundation in India

www.fulbright-india.org

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The experience also inspires teachers to connect Indian and U.S. students. Film professor Annette Danto of City University of New York in Brooklyn came to India in 2002 to make short documentary films on health and social issues in Tamil Nadu. Three years later, Danto started a program in which her students come to India during their January break to make documentary films with Indian students.

Other teachers have held class-to-class video conferences and designed projects for Indian and American students to conduct jointly.

Fulbright inspires the participants to band together and share their expertise. In

Courtesy Fran Oneal



Fran Oneal outside a mountain home during a family trek in the Himalayas.

India, 55 experts in communications and information technology have formed a strong network that conducts training. Indian and U.S. specialists in law support an association to advance clinical legal education methodology. Indian scholars in American Studies provide leadership to the association on multiethnic literature of the United States. Sixteen alumni chapters in India host talks by U.S. scholars and mentor aspiring applicants, and the Association of Indian Humphrey Fellows has convened a regional conference. U.S. alumni support Friends of Fulbright to India (<http://www.fulbrightindiaalumni.org/>), which welcomes Indian scholars and raises funds to help students travel.

The participants say the exchanges are life-changing because of the optimism and enthusiasm they generate.



Professor Jane E. Schukoske has been executive director of the U.S. Educational Foundation in India since May 2000. Her term ends in April 2008.